



# Fashion and Politics

Edited by Djurdja Bartlett

Yale University Press  
New Haven and London



## A black and white photograph of two men, likely Che Guevara and another revolutionary figure, with one man raising his fist in a salute.



## II. Reform or Revolution

#### IV. Resistance or Recuperation

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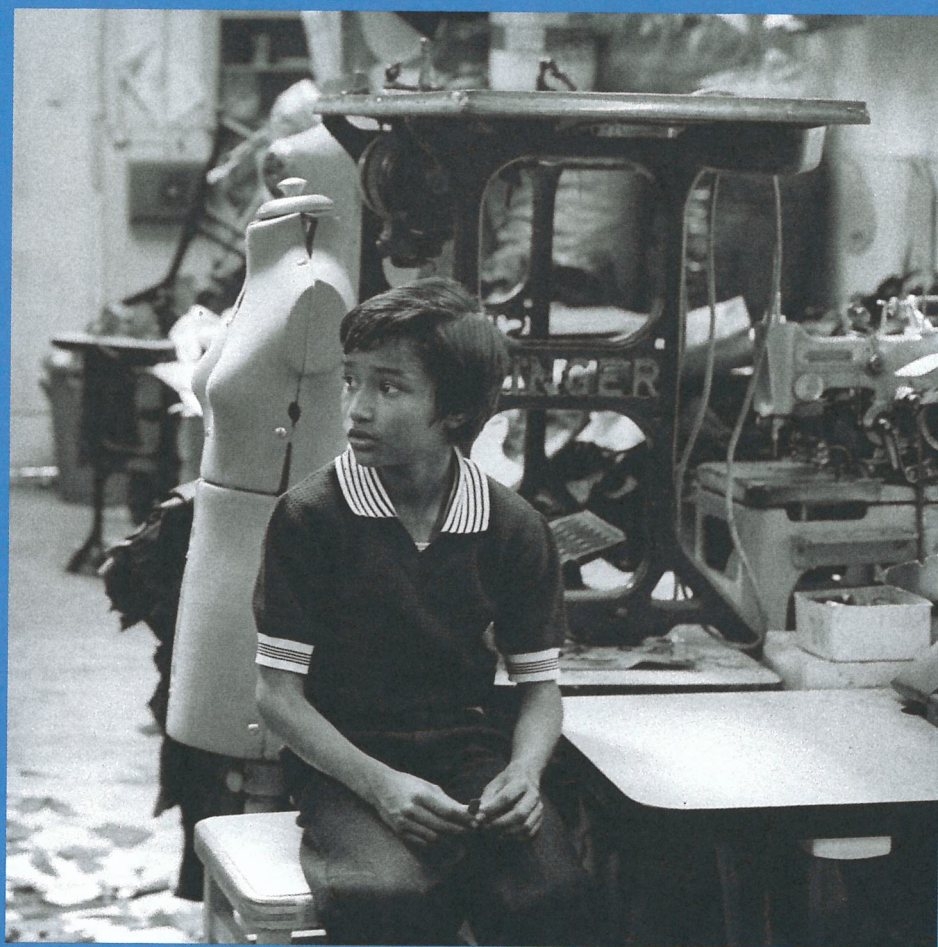


FIG. 73  
Boy in small clothing  
factory off Brick Lane, East  
End of London, 1978

## ‘Thrown Away Like a Piece of Cloth’: Fashion Production and the European Refugee Crisis

Serkan Delice

During an appearance on the US TV talk show *Late Night with Seth Meyers* on 13 April 2016, Anna Wintour, the editor-in-chief of *American Vogue*, used the phrase ‘migrant chic’ to describe, and praise, Kanye West’s new fashion collection. She was recounting her attendance at the event in New York’s Madison Square Garden where West had debuted his new album, *The Life of Pablo*, and his *Yeezy Season 3* fashion line. After receiving ‘a firestorm of criticism’ for her ‘insensitive’ comments, Wintour recanted, saying: ‘I apologise if my remark was offensive in any way. The migrant crisis is real, and I didn’t intend to trivialise that issue.’<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, there are now more people displaced than at any time since the Second World War. The media have been proclaiming a ‘global refugee crisis’, especially after 19 April 2015 when at least 800 refugees<sup>2</sup> drowned while attempting to cross to the Italian island of Lampedusa. But, as Alexander Betts and Paul Collier argue, this, in reality, was ‘a European crisis. And it was a crisis of politics rather than a crisis of numbers’.<sup>3</sup> In this harsh, hostile and downright destructive environment, human catastrophes are at best registered, and increasingly normalised, through a largely quantitative, and at times fleetingly compassionate, language of humanitarian crisis. But the lives, health and well-being of migrants and refugees are in serious jeopardy, not only due to the absence of a worldwide humanitarian support system that should protect both the 10 per cent who try to reach – often under perilous conditions – the ‘developed’ world and the 90 per cent who remain – and mostly suffer from destitution and discrimination – in the ‘developing’ world.<sup>4</sup> They are also threatened by the violence of what Nicholas De Genova calls the ‘Border Spectacle’, that is, a spectacle of border enforcement and immigration policing at increasingly militarised and securitised European borders, whereby a whole regime of migrant ‘legality’ and ‘illegality’ is produced in order to protect and sustain the capitalist-nationalist world order.<sup>5</sup> Through ‘national’ borders, De Genova reminds us, ‘national’ states ‘legally and politically produce and mediate the social and spatial differences that capital may then capitalise upon and exploit’.<sup>6</sup> In other words, capitalist globalisation, as Slavoj Žižek usefully captures, relies on ‘the idea of a self-enclosed globe separating its privileged Inside from its



Outside', establishing 'a radical class division across the entire globe, separating those protected by the sphere from those left vulnerable outside it'.<sup>7</sup>

The phrase 'migrant chic', therefore, is indeed a problematic one: it dilutes and obscures the extent of systemic misery and degradation experienced by most migrants and refugees by assimilating it into another spectacle – namely, the spectacle of fashion, which is characterised by ever-increasing acceleration, appropriation and transience. Yet it is also possible to interpret this apparent blunder in a different and more constructive manner: can 'migrant chic' not be seen as a call for us to confront the persistent division between the material production of fashion, to which the exploitation of cheapened migrant and refugee labour has always been central,<sup>8</sup> and the symbolic production of fashion, that is, the privileged domain of design, creativity and chic? After all, the so-called migrant crisis, when it comes to much of the urban garment industry, is *not* a crisis, but a key, endemic feature and facilitator of a 'particularly extreme form of flexibility', which is defined by low skill needs, high seasonal fluctuations and extensive subcontracting, and has remained at the heart of the obstinately volatile fashion production ever since the late-nineteenth-century period of growth to today.<sup>9</sup>

#### Beyond crisis

Thus, exploring the production of fashion allows us to interrogate the efficacy of the notion of 'crisis' – as well as of the labels 'migrant' and 'refugee'. Reflecting on the historically ingrained centrality of migrant and refugee labour to the production of clothing, on the other hand, enables us to challenge, and ultimately abolish, fashion's hierarchical division of labour as well as its tired and facile categories of 'inclusivity' and 'exclusivity'. Before asking who is excluded from, or who should be included within, fashion, we should first ask how the very terms of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' are established, by whom, and according to what criteria. Who, in other words, has the power and privilege to articulate the terms of exclusion and inclusion, or of appropriation and appreciation, when millions of fashion objects themselves are being produced by immigrant and refugee workers in a globalised sweatshop? After all, *why* should it be unthinkable for migrants and refugees to associate themselves, and be associated, with the chic element?

In order to answer these questions, this essay aims to create a dialogue between analyses of recent immigration and refugee movements and those of the urban garment industry by first historicising the relationship between fashion production and the European refugee 'crisis', and then focusing on the plight of Syrian refugees working in the Turkish garment industry, including factories that produce clothing for European high street brands.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, this essay argues that it is important for us, namely, consumers, producers and researchers of fashion, to grasp how the critical, conceptual and intellectual capacities, aspirations, and strategic and tactical choices of migrant and refugee workers remain a threat to capital/borders<sup>11</sup> and thus are capable of reinventing fashion

and relations of production in a way that facilitates the abolition of classes/borders and the expansion of the creative powers of *all* human beings in their relationship with fashion objects.<sup>12</sup>

#### Immigrants in the production of fashion: a reserve army of labour

Writing of the mechanisation of the clothing industry in the early 1860s, Karl Marx describes the sewing machine as 'the decisively revolutionary machine':

*At last the critical point was reached. The basis of the old method, sheer brutality in the exploitation of the workpeople . . . no longer sufficed for the extending markets and for the still more rapidly extending competition of the capitalists. The hour struck for the advent of machinery.*<sup>13</sup>

But, as Annie Phizacklea convincingly argues, the introduction of the sewing machine in Britain in 1851 did not generate, in London, the move from home to factory production. Rather, the clothing industry's feasibility 'relied upon a cheap, unskilled reserve army of female and immigrant labour trapped in London's East End'.<sup>14</sup>

According to Phizacklea, the large-scale immigration, in 1881–6, of Russian and Polish Jewish refugees, who were fleeing the pogroms in their homelands, did not initiate but rather 'intensified' the system of sweating and subcontracting – an oppressive and malignant system that had already 'proliferated in the London clothing trade on the backs of largely female labour'. Confronted by racism and language barriers, the new refugees entered this system by finding work 'wherever they could or they made work for themselves in the highly competitive subcontracting system in clothing'. The fact that many of the immigrants had been tailors in their homelands was often not recognised by contemporary investigators of the East End clothing industry – Phizacklea reminds us that 'the ready-to-wear section of the clothing industry was traditionally Eastern European Jewish' and thus 'it was only to be expected that friends, relations, and co-ethnics would enter an industry where their compatriots had already created a niche' (figs 73–5).<sup>15</sup> Instead, Jewish immigrant workers were often racially stereotyped in order to explain the perceived primitiveness of the East End clothing trades, which had remained dependent upon the largely precarious sweatshop/workshop sector with its retinue of homeworkers, where conditions were mostly appalling. That is, there was no substantial shift, in the East End, to using capital-intensive technologies that would raise the productivity of labour in a regularised, and potentially more benign, setting: factory organisation. It is worth noting that by 1871, all of the 58 clothing factories in Britain were based in the provincial cities.<sup>16</sup>

Andrew Godley's important research on immigrant entrepreneurs demonstrates that the dominant, nineteenth-century view of clothing industry development was misleading for two related reasons: first, for its equation of factories with progress – that is, the false assumption that factory organisation was more efficient than workshop production. Godley shows that in 1907 workshops 'were still the dominant form of organisation in the clothing trades with 56 per cent





FIG. 74  
Tailoring workshop, East End  
of London, c.1900



FIG. 75  
Sweatshop, East End of  
London, c.1920s

of total employment. They were also 12 per cent more efficient than factories (in terms of net output per worker)' and East End Jewish workshops 'were able to out-compete factories everywhere but Leeds by 1911'. By 1935, the wholesale trade, that is, ready-made clothing, was 'the dominant source of output and employment in the industry with almost 40 per cent of net output' and 'even in the sectors which dominated the Leeds based industry it was the smaller-size firms which were most efficient'; London firms, likewise, were 'smaller than anywhere else, more efficient than anywhere else and these firms were increasingly concentrated in the East End'. Godley attributes the persistence, and high efficiency, of East End workshops to the fact that, despite the growing aggregate demand, the awaited demand for any specific model of a garment was very indeterminate. This highly unpredictable custom meant that firms had 'little incentive to invest in expensive machinery that would lead to high fixed costs'.<sup>17</sup> Small firms, in other words, were more conducive to the extraordinary flexibility required by volatile product demand, that is, by the dictates of fashion.

The perception of the clothing industry as a stubbornly backward and undeveloped sector was wrong, secondly, for its racialising construction of Jewish exceptionalism. Godley's research debunks the myth that the system of sweating was driven by Jewish immigrant workers' purported 'love of profit as distinct from any other form of money earning'<sup>18</sup> or by the so-called 'Jewish temperament [with] its desire to be independent'.<sup>19</sup> The persistence of sweating in the clothing industry, argues Godley, was caused by 'the nature of production of ready-made clothing, especially the high labour content. Whenever competition has pushed down garment prices, labour costs have always been the first to be put under pressure'. Besides, the limpness of cloth meant that 'the dexterity of the human hand in manoeuvring cloth through a sewing machine, especially the lighter fabrics,' has always been central to the production of clothing.<sup>20</sup>

This brief historical survey attests to what Nancy Green theorises as 'intermittent continuity' in the garment industry: seasonal, as well as intra-seasonal, fluctuations in demand and the resultant need for flexibility – that is, the ability to supply short runs of diversely styled garments at very short notice – often culminate in 'contracting within a context of cutthroat competition'.<sup>21</sup> Although the interventions of trade unions, human rights campaigners, global labour organisations, fashion retailers, investigative journalists, and labourers themselves lead, at times, to the amelioration of work conditions, the secondary sector of subcontracting continues to enable 'stubbornly recurrent pockets of evasion'. Thus, the question to be asked is whether such volatile flexibility can ever be managed without 'cutthroat competition, high turnover, and poor working conditions'.<sup>22</sup>

As recently as in August 2017, for example, the chief executives of Asos and New Look described the 'factories' in Leicester, a city in the East Midlands of England, as 'a ticking time bomb' due to 'unsafe conditions with fire escapes blocked up, workers exploited and paid far below minimum wage'.<sup>23</sup> It is revealing,



but not surprising, that the Leicester garment trade, as has been noted by Debbie Coulter from the Ethical Trading Initiative, is 'booming primarily on the back of a growing band of start-up very low-cost Etailers and Cash and Carry merchandisers supplying market traders and cheap high street independent stores', who seem to have little regard for the workers, most of whom are either South Asian women with limited English or undocumented migrant workers.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Green is right in pointing out that the Jewish tailor of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as a stock character, 'can only be but a metaphor' for successive generations of immigrants in the garment labour market. One might argue that both women and immigrants incline naturally towards homework and the informal labour market in order to gain quick access to a first job, where they can work among their own familial and regional networks and thus maintain a sense of community and tradition – Green quotes from a New York State labour investigator, who commented that 'the fertile soil of sweatshops is an immigrant community living in fear'. Yet it is also important, Green maintains, to consider the process of skill *acquisition*. In critically engaging with notions of innate or imported skill, Green argues that, for the bulk of the industry's labour force, skill signifies 'speed and accuracy': 'the repetitive tasks of the machine operator – 80 percent of the garment workers – are relatively easy to learn, and skill comes through practice.' In redefining skill as speed and accuracy, the industry provides those who have never sewn before in their lives with opportunities for 'easy entrance to the vast majority of operating jobs'. While acknowledging that 'garment work was chosen by vast numbers of women and immigrants because it fitted their needs' – seasonal fluctuations and the variety of workplaces do provide both women and immigrants new to the labour market with some room for manoeuvre and adaptation – Green concludes that, ultimately, what defines labour recruitment is industrial demand rather than labour supply, that is, the industry's ceaseless quest for cheapened labour.<sup>25</sup>

The key conclusions to be drawn from this history of immigrant presence in fashion production, which are equally relevant to understanding the plight of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees working in Turkish apparel 'factories', are threefold. First, an international reserve army of labour is necessary for the fluctuations in demand for labour generated not only by the particularly volatile nature of fashion production, but also, and more significantly, by the periodic cycle of prosperity and crisis, which is an integral component of capitalism.<sup>26</sup> In his 1845 book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich Engels tells us that 'the rapid extension of English industry could not have taken place if England had not possessed in the numerous and impoverished population of Ireland a reserve at command'.<sup>27</sup> Capitalism, in other words, operates through fluctuations and, therefore, must have a permanent reserve of workers, except in the brief periods of greatest prosperity – this reserve army, or surplus labouring population, 'embraces an immense multitude' during periods of crisis.<sup>28</sup> Marx argues that this 'relatively redundant population of labourers' that forms 'a disposable industrial reserve army'

is a necessary product, and a condition of existence, of capitalistic accumulation, as it 'creates, for the changing needs of the self-expansion of capital, a mass of human material always ready for exploitation'.<sup>29</sup>

Second, what has been singled out as a 'refugee crisis' – wrongly, I will argue – should be seen as a consequence of wider, recurrent crises of overaccumulation that occur when surpluses of capital and labour exist side by side with seemingly no means to bring them together in a profitable way.<sup>30</sup> According to David Harvey, one way in which such surpluses may be absorbed is geographical expansion and spatial displacement through opening up 'new markets, new production capacities and new resource, social and labour possibilities elsewhere'.<sup>31</sup> Such crises of overaccumulation, however, have increasingly been paralleled by a rise in what Harvey calls 'accumulation by dispossession', that is, accumulation based upon predation, fraudulence and violence, leading, especially in impoverished countries, to the appropriation and devaluation of assets, dispossessing whole populations of their land and livelihood. Contemporary neo-liberal policies of deregulation, predatory actions of finance capital, privatisation of hitherto public spaces and resources, and the unfettered monopoly of power assumed by multinational capitalist corporations, all cause myriad forms of dispossession, including the displacement of millions of people from their homes, land and livelihood. As Ipsita Chatterjee poignantly reminds us, displacement is 'a fundamental transformation of the genetic code of a people, and thereby the ecology of the society' – once a mass of people are displaced and dispossessed, their displacement transforms them into 'refugees, migrants, and squatters akin to Marx's beggars and vagabonds', that is, into a disposable reserve army of labour.<sup>32</sup> What the notion of a 'refugee crisis' does is to obfuscate this deeply inherent relationship between imperialist capital accumulation by dispossession and the displacement of whole populations that creates an international reserve army of labour to be mobilised when capital needs them.<sup>33</sup> Such crisis talk also reinforces what De Genova aptly criticises as the 'depoliticising language of a "humanitarian crisis" with its root causes always attributed to troubles "elsewhere", usually in desperate and chaotic places ostensibly "outside" of Europe'.<sup>34</sup> Exonerating Europe from all responsibility for the (post)colonial root causes of chronic dispossession and displacement in 'other' places, this Eurocentric and imperialist language of crisis, in turn, legitimates increasingly violent practices of border enforcement and immigration policing by European border protection authorities.<sup>35</sup>

Third, the distinction between 'refugees' as compulsory migrants fleeing from war, persecution, or natural disaster on the one hand and 'migrants' as voluntary seekers of better life opportunities on the other should not always be taken for granted. Tom Vickers insightfully argues that the compulsion factor may also be relevant to migrant labour: 'In many cases, foreign investment-driven development of export-oriented agriculture and manufacturing in materially underdeveloped countries has displaced rural workers from the land and at times has led to





FIG. 76  
 Syrian refugee workers in  
 a workshop in Antakya,  
 Turkey, producing military  
 wear for the Syrian market,  
 2016



a restructuring of the labour force, by drawing more women into waged employment and creating rising unemployment among men.<sup>36</sup> The dispossession caused by capitalist accumulation, in other words, means that for some people, 'voluntary' economic migration may be the only option for survival.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that refugees, just like migrants, may have capacities for recovery and resilience, as well as aspirations and life goals. In their publication *Commonwealth* (2009), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri remind us that the poor, migrants, and precarious workers 'are often conceived as excluded, but really, though subordinated, they are completely within the global rhythms of bio-political production'.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the next section aims to discuss why, and how, we should try to excavate and understand what Hardt and Negri describe as 'the forms of life, languages, movements, or capacities for innovation' generated, in this case, by Syrian refugees working in the Turkish garment industry.

#### **Syrian refugees in Turkish garment supply chains: a story of systemic violence**

Since the Syrian civil war officially began on 15 March 2011, more than 5.6 million Syrians have fled the country as refugees, and over 6 million are internally displaced within Syria. The majority of Syria's 5.6 million refugees have fled, by land and sea, across borders to neighbouring countries where most of them live in urban areas, with around only 8 per cent accommodated in refugee camps.<sup>38</sup> Turkey hosts the largest number of registered Syrian refugees in the world: according to official government data, at the end of April 2018, there were 3,588,877 persons from Syria registered under temporary protection – a regime established to respond to the mass influx of individuals fleeing the ongoing war and conflict in Syria.<sup>39</sup>

Since 2015, there has been an increasing number of reports and investigations exposing the abuse and exploitation of Syrian refugees working in the Turkish garment industry (figs 76–8), including factories that produce clothing for European high street brands. When they visited Istanbul in July 2016, researchers from the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, an international NGO that tracks the human rights impacts of over 6,500 companies in over 180 countries, observed discrimination, wages far below the minimum, and child labour. The workshops they saw 'typically had been between 10–20 workers' and they detected 'numerous examples of child labour and poor health & safety – including one factory on the first floor with a large hole in the wall'; they heard accounts of Syrians being paid well below the minimum wage, treated 'much more harshly for minor transgressions' compared to their Turkish fellow workers, and, in some cases, sacked after a few days' work 'without any pay for the hours worked'; they were also told that 'Syrian child labour was widely used in workshops and these children were typically aged between 11–14 (both boys and girls)'.<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere, Frederik Johannisson, an independent journalist and researcher, wrote about Shukri, a 12-year-old Syrian Kurd who works often 60 hours a week in a basement in an Istanbul suburb, 'supplying the 15 sewing machines producing clothing mainly destined for the

European market', and Leila, a 20-year-old Syrian woman, who works in an 'under the stairs' garment workshop in the coastal city of Mersin to earn 1.6 Turkish Lira (TL) (37p in 2016) per hour, which is drastically below the national minimum wage in Turkey.<sup>41</sup> A recent survey conducted by researchers from Istanbul University shows that Syrian women refugee workers in the textile sector are at the very bottom of the wage scale: their average monthly wage, which is approximately 776 TL (roughly £127 as of May 2018), is about half of what Turkish male workers earn and, also, is 489 TL less than the average of all workers (Turkish male and female, and Syrian male, workers included). Besides, the average monthly wage of the Syrian women refugee workers who participated in the survey is about half of the national minimum wage.<sup>42</sup>

The Labour Act of Turkey No. 4857 prohibits the employment of children under the age of 15 and limits the working hours of those under 18. In Turkey, child labour had been a long-standing problem, even before Syrian refugees arrived in the country.<sup>43</sup> However, as migration specialist Murat Erdoğan points out, Syrian child labour 'has become the norm', especially in seasonal, labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, since Syrian refugee children are seen as being 'easier to manipulate, less demanding and most definitely cheaper than anyone else (fig. 79). Children learn the language more easily, and they acquire the skills required for basic jobs much faster'.<sup>44</sup> In October 2016, when he visited Istanbul garment workshops to conduct an undercover investigation into allegations of exploitation of Syrian refugees and their children, BBC *Panorama* reporter Darragh MacIntyre described the situation as follows: 'I'd been told that child labour was endemic in Turkey. But I wasn't prepared for the reality of it. Or the scale of it. One basement workshop was almost entirely staffed with children, many of whom couldn't have been more than seven or eight years old, the very picture of Dickensian misery'.<sup>45</sup> In February 2017, journalist Burak Coşan reported that in the Küçükpazar neighbourhood of Istanbul's Fatih district, children aged between 10 and 14 years were working up to 12 hours a day; some of these children were seen 'carrying packages in the corridors bearing the logos of well-known brands' – one adult worker told Coşan that children's wages depended on 'their age and the job they do. Those who are ironing earn nearly 600 TL [per month]. Those running errands earn a maximum of 400 TL [per month]'.<sup>46</sup> Skill acquisition, in the case of Syrian refugee child workers, does not always lead to an increase in wages. In one case, a 16-year-old Syrian refugee worker told journalist Didem Tali that after working at the same shop for the past three years, and despite having learned everything he could, including operating all the machines and doing ironing, he was still earning 'a third to half of what Turkish people make', with his salary being the same as when he had started three years ago.<sup>47</sup> In another case, reported by journalist Patrick Kingsley, a 13-year-old Syrian refugee worker, who 'can perform most of the roles on the assembly line', including moulding leather into the shape of a shoe and threading its different parts together with the machine, was earning a daily wage of 'less than \$10 – lower than the retail price of every pair of shoes' he makes.<sup>48</sup>





FIG. 77  
A Syrian refugee boy working  
in a Syrian-owned clothing  
factory in Gaziantep, Turkey,  
16 May 2016



FIG. 78  
Syrian refugees working  
in a Syrian-owned clothing  
factory in Gaziantep, Turkey,  
17 May 2016



What these reports and investigations reveal is an excruciatingly familiar story of accumulation by dispossession. Turkey's clothing industry, with a share of 3.4 per cent, is the eighth largest exporter in the world, and the third largest supplier to the EU (following China and Bangladesh).<sup>49</sup> In 2017, 71.4 per cent of the sector's exports have gone to EU countries, with Germany, Spain and the UK being the top three export nations respectively.<sup>50</sup> The Turkish textile and clothing industry, in other words, is one of the major players in the world market in terms of both production and exports, and continues to maintain and increase its competitiveness.<sup>51</sup> Yet Turkey's integration into the global production system has been characterised by the prevalent use of informal labour and, in particular, of women's informal work. According to Saniye Dedeoglu, the low level of foreign direct investment throughout the 1980s and 1990s was the reason why Turkey's international competitiveness, based on export-oriented and labour-intensive production, has led to the expansion of the informal sector. Small-scale, and sometimes family-run, garment workshops and home-based piecework are two important components of this largely unregulated sector, providing the labour-intensive garment industry with an abundant supply of cheapened labour. The industry 'operates from unregistered workplaces, where labour legislation and social security regulations are ignored'. One of the significant consequences of informalisation is that women's industrial work is usually not adequately recorded or recognised, and is thus rendered invisible. The workforce, observes Dedeoglu, 'is hired when orders have been placed and fired when orders stop coming in . . . Companies frequently do not pay the statutory social security contributions on behalf of their employees, or falsify records in order to pay less'.<sup>52</sup> Thus, workshop production and home-based work partake in a prevalent system of subcontracting, through which Turkish manufacturers reduce fixed costs; reach untapped resources of cheapened, disposable female and child labour; and achieve the flexibility necessary to cope with the erratic demands and aggressive purchasing practices of international retailers. This is how Turkey's garment industry established and maintained its competitiveness in the international market, to begin with.

Back in 2010, Nebahat Tokatli and others wrote about the ways in which Istanbul-based manufacturing supplier firms had been adapting to the new demands of international clothing retailers for increased speed, variety and fashionability – that is, to the pace of fast fashion driven by, and driving, hyper-obsolence, high disposability and excessive consumerism. In order to deal with capacity- and specialty-related issues, as well as with the pressures of keeping prices competitively low, the clothing industry had relied, even before the era of fast fashion, on 'a cascade of operations' subcontracted to 'smaller workshops working at the edge of illegality'. The move to fast fashion with its ever-shorter lead times, unpredictable schedules and small-batch production runs, however, meant that Turkish manufacturer suppliers ended up having to do whatever was necessary to survive in a competitive global capitalist economy, where



FIG. 79  
A Syrian refugee boy making shoe parts at a Turkish-owned workshop in Gaziantep, Turkey, 16 May 2016

international retailers can shift their purchasing elsewhere in order to achieve lower costs and enhanced agility. In this context, it is especially those women who work in family-owned manufacturing workshops, or are engaged in home-based work, who shoulder the burden of the manufacturers' determination to meet the arduous demands of international retailers. Nevertheless, Tokatli and others also emphasised that competency acquisition provided some women, especially those from middle-class backgrounds, with opportunities for entrepreneurship and empowerment: 'It was the previously unavailable female labour hidden in residential neighbourhoods . . . that invigorated the subcontracting component – together with the creative minds, professional skills and entrepreneurial capabilities of educated, middle-class women'.<sup>53</sup>

As of 2018, however, there seems to be a widespread pessimistic perception among Turkish suppliers and factory owners that the *konfeksiyon* (ready-to-wear)



industry has been undergoing a severe crisis due to the increased international competition between manufacturing countries, the shrinking of the market, and, more importantly, the fluctuating demands and cut-throat purchasing practices of international retailer brands. Industry experts claim that young Turkish workers are less and less drawn to working in garment factories not only because of long hours, low wages, strenuous working conditions and widespread lack of social security coverage, but also because of the expansion of the tertiary sector of the economy offering jobs seen as more comfortable and prestigious than garment production.<sup>54</sup> In this context of alleged ongoing crisis and increasingly frantic attempts to reduce costs and enhance flexibility, suppliers to national and international retailers – as well as, and especially, their mostly unauthorised sub-suppliers – alleviate the labour shortage problem and reinvigorate profits by drawing upon the cheapened and unregulated labour of Syrian refugee workers, which is perceived as throwing a new lifeline to the garment industry.<sup>55</sup> Recently, the Chairman and CEO of a major clothing company in Turkey has encapsulated the indispensable role played by Syrian refugee workers by saying: ‘Had it not been for the Syrians, our shelves would have remained empty’.<sup>56</sup>

In this context, the question of improvement of working conditions, and the legalisation and formalisation of the labour force, through work permits and compliance monitoring and inspection schemes, is certainly not an insignificant one. However, despite the fact that work permits, since January 2016, have been made accessible for persons under Temporary Protection, providing legal access to employment for Syrians and other persons of concern living in Turkey, the number of Syrian nationals issued work permits in 2016 was just 13,290.<sup>57</sup> Only approximately 2,000 work permits were granted to workers in the industrial sectors, including the textile-apparel industry.<sup>58</sup> As Emre Korkmaz rightfully points out, this is significantly, and deceptively, low, given that ‘approximately half of the Syrian refugees in Turkey are of working age’. The centrality of informal refugee labour to the garment industry stems not only from the sub-suppliers’ need to reduce labour costs and meet rapid turnover and erratic deadlines. The flexibility of the informal sector, argues Korkmaz, also allows refugees and irregular migrants themselves to pursue ‘survival strategies’ based on their social networks and possibilities of entrepreneurship.<sup>59</sup>

Likewise, it is vital to hold international retailer brands accountable by asking them a) to monitor and audit not only the first-tier factories, that is, their official suppliers, but also the often undeclared second- and third-tier subcontractors, to which the first-tier factories outsource, and b) to modify their purchasing practices, so that the environment of abuse engendered by undeclared subcontracting and informal work arrangements can be eliminated. These are two of the useful recommendations made by Korkmaz and Samentha Goethals, whose fieldwork reveals how global buyers’ unpredictable orders ‘put significant stress on suppliers’, leading the latter to outsource to smaller, undeclared subcontractors, as young buyers

‘reportedly disregard price components of production, including labour costs, minimum wage, and health and safety, and tend to set unreasonably low prices’.<sup>60</sup>

What these recommendations do not address, however, is the historically recurrent incompatibility between fashion production on the one hand and factory organisation, formalisation and stricter regulation on the other. One should ask here an apparently cynical but still important question: if the constant growth in demand for consumer products is indispensable for capitalism to avert crises, then *why* should international retailer brands reduce the speed and intensity, which is what the question of changing buying practices ultimately boils down to? As insightfully argued by Andrew Brooks, the fact that late capitalism is particularly susceptible to crises implies that any radical attempt to modify the degree of surplus value extracted from labour would pull capitalism into deep recession. The surplus supply of labour at a global level means that ‘crisis-ridden factories just close and reopen elsewhere’.<sup>61</sup> Thus, it is crucial to remember that the currently hegemonic discourse around social and sustainability compliance, corporate social responsibility, ethical supply chain audits and review of purchasing policies may actually be contributing to what Žižek calls ‘extra-economic charity’, which is needed by today’s capitalism to maintain the cycle of social reproduction, as it is no longer capable of reproducing itself on its own.<sup>62</sup> Such extra-economic charity and benevolence obscures the extent of the systemic violence inherent in the very structure of capitalist social relations, reinforcing the myth of a ‘responsible’ or, even worse, ‘moral’ capitalism.<sup>63</sup>

### Conclusion: beyond capital

What aspect of dispossession should we then focus on? And how can we challenge it? Speaking of the emergence of wholly new mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession, Harvey points out that ‘the commodification of cultural forms, histories and intellectual creativity entails wholesale dispossessions’, as capitalism ‘internalises cannibalistic as well as predatory and fraudulent practices’.<sup>64</sup> The hierarchical division of labour between those who are given opportunities to use and develop their intellectual creativity in producing fashion as meaning and those who are expected to transform that meaning into actual, material fashion apparel – often under ruthlessly draining and wearisome conditions – dispossesses the latter of their skills, capacities and creativity. A significant segment of the Syrian refugee workers in garment supply chains, when they were living back in Syria, were engaged in jobs other than textiles and apparel production – jobs that require formal higher education and advanced skills. While this implies an enforced demotion into the garment sector out of desperation on the part of some refugee workers, a recently conducted survey also shows that 52 per cent of the Syrian refugee garment workers, when they were back in Syria, were actually involved in textiles- and clothing-related professions.<sup>65</sup> The degradation and obscuring of their skills, experience and knowledge is a consequence not only of the low-road labour practices endemic in the fashion industry. It is also the result of our own inability,



as researchers speaking from within the privileged Inside, to relocate the discourse of fashion around the movements, competencies and creative aspirations of those workers who are allowed to produce fashion *as material object only* – and often under the most dismal, uninspiring and dehumanising conditions. The productivity, and *possibility* of creative powers, of the garment workers seems to be absent from the hegemonic fashion discourse, which is more about stimulating consumer desire through captivating brand images, trends and spectacles, and less about questions of labour, poverty and immigration and refugee movements. The capitalist, consumerist logic of transitory sign-value moving from one commodity to another, as Adam Briggs notes, ‘ensures that the actual making of physical garments, and the conditions within which this occurs, along with the associated environmental impact, remain out of sight, unconsidered’.<sup>66</sup> A Syrian refugee worker employed on a daily basis, and without any social security coverage, in an ‘under the stairs’ garment workshop in the suburbs of Istanbul conveys this sense of utter invisibility and dispossession in the following words: ‘Machines have all the rights. If one breaks, they will fix it straight away, because they benefit from the machine. But if anything happens to a Syrian, they will throw him away like a piece of cloth’.<sup>67</sup>

A piece of cloth, however, is never – and ideally should never be – a piece of cloth only. We are all viscerally, intellectually and aesthetically connected to our garments. As Brooks suggests, the fashion industry might provide ‘potential for a collective sense of common responsibility to be forged on account of the shared intimacy associated with garments which are made, worn and re-worn around the world by diverse people’.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, fashion production *on all its levels* should be a creative process by enabling the flourishing of innovative, intellectual and conceptual faculties of *all* workers in their relationship, and intimacy, with fashion objects. The hierarchical division of labour at the heart of fashion production – between the mostly Eurocentric symbolic, cultural and discursive production on the one hand and the peripheralised material production on the other – makes it a tremendous challenge for us to find ways to carry out Hardt and Negri’s important project: translating the productivity and possibility of the poor into power.<sup>69</sup> Reducing the sheer amount of speed, precariousness, drudgery and exploitation in the sweatshop regime through systemic and spatial interventions is extremely difficult in the absence of a fundamental political transformation that would lead garment workers to achieve the collective ownership of their own means of production.<sup>70</sup> This is exactly the reason why we should develop, in the meantime, engaged and innovative methodologies that would facilitate us in creating mutually transformative conversations with garment workers – conversations that would hybridise the discourse and practice of fashion by putting centre stage workers’ perceptions and experiences of, and tastes and skills in, fashion *in its entirety*, including its hitherto privileged creative, aesthetic and immaterial aspects. This requires us, above all, to challenge the widespread assumption that garment work in a sweatshop environment requires no previous knowledge or skills.

The specific significance of immigrant and refugee workers stems from the fact that their dispossession reveals some of the ways in which fashion, and indeed capitalism, has survived crises by regenerating the flexibility necessary to handle the magnitude and fickleness of consumer demand. Their mostly unacknowledged centrality to fashion production exposes the limitations of the hegemonic fashion discourse. Thus, the extent to which they are capable of affecting the conditions surrounding fashion production should be analysed.<sup>71</sup> But also, and more importantly, we should bear in mind that immigrant and refugee workers are not only workers – they are also, and inevitably, immigrants and refugees. Their often agonising journeys unmask the porousness, and hence the constructedness and artificiality, of geographical and ideological borders. Their multi-layered and shifting identities as both immigrants/refugees and workers unveil the very limitations of ‘work’ as well as of the worker’s identity. Drawing on the work of philosopher and politician Mario Tronti, Hardt and Negri remind us of the importance, for workers, of struggling against work, against themselves, against the identity that defines them as workers. ‘The primary object of class struggle’, they argue, ‘is not to kill capitalists but to demolish the social structures and institutions that maintain their privilege and authority, abolishing too, thereby, the conditions of proletarian subordination’. They elucidate that the refusal of work, and the abolition of the worker, does not signify the end of production; rather, it means ‘the invention, beyond capital, of as yet unimagined relations of production that allow and facilitate an expansion of our creative powers’.<sup>72</sup> One of the ways to explore the possibilities of self-transformation beyond the capitalist structures and institutions of worker subordination – and beyond the identity of the worker – will be to facilitate immigrant and refugee workers in repossessing not only their skills and competencies but also their broader intimacy with fashion as meaning. Another way will be to work together towards creating autonomous, non-hierarchical and hybridised spaces of liberation where we can mix symbolic and material production, art and craftspersonship, utility and chic, and leisure and creativity. After all, there is no reason why the ‘migrant chic’ should be an unimaginable, unseemly idea – as long as immigrant and refugee garment workers *themselves* partake in its production.

#### Acknowledgements

I am grateful, first and foremost, to Dr Djurdja Bartlett for encouraging me to produce this article. Next, I would like to thank Dr Sophie Oliver and anonymous peer review readers for their astute recommendations. My interest in, and knowledge of, the garment industry was nurtured by ‘The Production of Fashion’ lectures delivered by Adam Briggs at London College of Fashion. I wish to thank him for his support and encouragement. I also thank Veyssel Eşsiz from the Refugee Rights Turkey for providing me with the statistical information relating to Syrian refugees in Turkey.



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### 9 Three Pairs of Khaki Trousers

- 1 For this essay, I received funding from National Research Foundation through the Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative, University of Cape Town.
- 2 In a further sense of removal, I have taken these three objects out of the archival framing of the museum to further interrogate their critical potential, thus the objects are twice removed.
- 3 See Carolyn Hamilton, 2011, 'Backstory, Biography, and the Life of the James Stuart Archive', in *History in Africa*, African Studies Association, vol. 38, pp. 319–41, p. 327.
- 4 Apartheid was a radical system of segregation, discrimination and oppression based on the grounds of race that existed in South Africa between 1948 and 1994.
- 5 Khusu was identified as 'Basutho' and worked as a chef in a hotel in Cape Town.
- 6 Tribal or ethnic categorisations have had damaging impacts on questions of identity politics, land-rights and heritage practices and concepts of material culture. See Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer (eds), 2017, *Tribing and Untribing the Archive: Identity and the Material Record in Southern KwaZulu-Natal in the Late Independent and Colonial Period* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu Natal Press).
- 7 See Robyn-Leigh Cedras, 2016, *In the Halls of History: The Making and Unmaking of the Life-Casts at the Ethnography Galleries of the Iziko South African Museum*, M.Phil Thesis, University of Cape Town.
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- 9 Lelong Immelman donated a selection of her father's clothing to the museum that included this pair of trousers, a safari suit, shirts, a vest, ties, socks and a pair of jogging shorts.
- 10 Sweet-Orr & Lybro opened in 1931 in Elsies River, Cape Town, manufacturing workwear trousers and overalls that included the international brand Lybro.
- 11 Beaded artefacts in all forms entered ethnographic collections from the late nineteenth century. See Anitra Nettleton, 2014, 'Women, Beadwork and Bodies: The Making and Marking of Migrant Liminality in South Africa, 1850–1950', in *African Studies*, vol. 73 (3), pp. 314–64, and John M. MacKenzie, 2009, 'Museums and Empire: Making and Marking of Migrant Liminality in South Africa, 1850–1950', in *African Studies*, vol. 73 (3), pp. 314–64, and John M. MacKenzie, 2009, *Museums and Empire: Natural History, Human Cultures and Colonial Identities* (Manchester: Manchester University Press). All four pairs of 'Xhosa' trousers were purchased from the South African beadwork collector and dealer Stephen Long.
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### 11 'Thrown Away Like a Piece of Cloth'

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- 2 The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) highlights the importance of making a clear distinction between the terms 'refugee' and 'migrant': refugees 'are persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution', whereas migrants 'choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons.' According to the UNHCR, the majority of people arriving in Italy and Greece 'especially have been from countries mired in war or which otherwise are considered to be "refugee-producing" and for whom international protection is needed.' See Adrian Edwards, 2016, 'UNHCR viewpoint: "Refugee" or "migrant" – Which is right?', UNHCR website, 11 July; [www.unhcr.org/uk/news/latest/2016/7/55df0e556/unhcr-viewpoint-refugee-migrant-right.html](http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/latest/2016/7/55df0e556/unhcr-viewpoint-refugee-migrant-right.html) (accessed 7 May 2018).
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# Contributors

**Djurdja Bartlett** is Reader in Histories and Cultures of Fashion at the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London (UAL), where she directs Transnational Fashion Hub. She is also member of the research centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAIN, UAL).

**Serkan Delice** is Lecturer and Research Coordinator in Cultural and Historical Studies at the London College of Fashion, UAL.

**Rhonda Garelick** is Professor of Art, Design, History and Theory and Associate Dean of Fashion at Parsons School of Design, New School University, New York.

**Erica de Greef** is Senior Curator of Fashion at Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town.

**Jin Li Lim** is a historian of modern China and an adjunct lecturer in Cultural and Contextual Studies at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore.

**Gabi Scardi** is an art critic, curator and writer.

**Anthony Sullivan** is Senior Lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies at the London College of Fashion, UAL.

**Carol Tulloch**, writer and curator, is Professor of Dress, Diaspora and Transnationalism at UAL, based at Chelsea College of Arts, She is also a member of TrAIN, UAL, and an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

**Jane Tynan** is Senior Lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies at Central Saint Martins, UAL.

**Barbara Vinken** is Professor of French and Comparative Literature at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich.